

VZCZCXR05455
OO RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH RUEHTRO
DE RUEHGO #0468/01 1621215
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 101215Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7749
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1267
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4806
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8355
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5917
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1643
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1736
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000468

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO
PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/09/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM BM EAID

SUBJECT: BURMA: HELICOPTERS RESOLVED, ACCESS STILL A PROBLEM

REF: RANGOON 448

RANGOON 00000468 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: P/E Chief Leslie Hayden for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Advance teams for the post Nargis assessment visited the Delta June 5-7 and found that 50-75 percent of the population in the worst affected areas perished in the cyclone. Some teams confronted difficulties with access in the areas they visited. World Bank and ADB officials who helped train the teams found GOB participants able and receptive, but noted the GOB had still not released data to the UN and ASEAN, as it had promised to do. The UN and INGO staff continue to have problems obtaining quick permission to visit the affected areas. Six WFP helicopters are now operating in the Delta, and the last four arrived in Burma today. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Embassy officers attended a send-off briefing for the Post Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) teams who officially began their visits to cyclone affected areas on June 9 (reftel). The teams consist of over 250 people and include 54 members of the GOB representing 18 ministries, as well as participants from the UN and ASEAN. World Bank and ADB experts are included in the teams as well, under the ASEAN banner.

¶3. (SBU) Two advance assessment teams traveled to Labutta and Pya Pon June 5-7, to test methodology, finalize logistical requirements, and identify specific challenges in preparation for the final assessment teams that would travel throughout the affected areas June 9-19. The advance team that traveled to villages south of Labutta reported finding established "frontier camps" where villagers could secure essential items and food. In the villages they visited, they found an average of 50-75 percent of the population perished in the cyclone. They reported that villages they visited seemed willing to re-establish their livelihoods, but needed additional farming and fishing equipment to do so. Specific challenges the team outlined were the difficulty of establishing local contacts and finding villages they wanted to visit without local guides. They suggested the assessment teams involve local government officials to obtain data, try to secure pre-cyclone data for comparison, and find good interpreters. Without asking GOB permission, the teams will

use GPS to pinpoint villages.

¶4. (SBU) The team sent to Pya Pon faced challenges with lodging, fuel, and electricity, and noted that food supplies were not available in all villages. They commented that local officials showed no flexibility on their planned itinerary and would not let the team visit villages where they had not obtained prior written permission to visit. The team leader warned assessment participants that international staff should prepare to have their papers inspected at all times. The team found no outbreak of disease in the villages they visited.

¶5. (SBU) During the most interesting portion of the briefing, a British medical doctor with the NGO Merlin presented a video to the assessors to show the teams what they could expect when they entered the field. The doctor had accompanied the advance teams where he shot footage of some of the worst hit villages and filmed enumerators interviewing cyclone victims about their needs. He warned participants that they would face an emotionally and physically difficult week, and commented that, though experienced in natural disaster response work, his visit to the Nargis affected areas was some of the worst scenes he had ever encountered. The video footage shown at this government-sponsored sendoff was of the same scenes the regime's mouthpiece newspaper has been accusing the West and exile media of manufacturing to embarrass the government. Deputy Foreign Minister and TCG Chair Kyaw Thu closed the briefing by seconding the challenges of the areas and advising the assessors to be polite and not to make the assessment a political issue. The purpose was to help those in need, he emphasized.

RANGOON 00000468 002.2 OF 003

¶6. (C) In a separate meeting, World Bank and ADB officials told pol/econ chief their main goal was to assist ASEAN to deliver a good product. They would take a slower, wait and see approach to see if a positive and constructive openness with the GOB developed and was maintained before transitioning to any participation in long-term reconstruction efforts. If the World Bank did anything, they emphasized, it would focus on community development aspects.

¶7. (C) World Bank and ADB officials who assisted in the intensive training for the assessment teams reported that the GOB participants were "responsive and receptive" during the sessions. They noted that although the GOB had committed to share its data during the TCG discussions, the Ministry of Planning had yet to release any, which hindered ASEAN and UN efforts to close the information gap. The officials lamented the lack of baseline data about the pre-Nargis situation, and were struggling over determining what standard they should build back to. The World Bank team elaborated on the advance teams findings; for instance, some of the villages the assessors visited had only a two-day supply of food. They also noted that the team that visited Labutta had much more freedom of movement than the team that visited Pya Pon. Local officials in Labutta were flexible and allowed the team to visit villages they had not previously planned to see.

¶8. (SBU) At a June 10 briefing for donors, Acting UN Humanitarian Coordinator Dan Baker explained that the government had followed through on its commitment to grant visas, but had fallen behind on granting travel permits to UN and INGO international staff. Wait time for permits was now five days and in some cases for INGOS, much longer. Baker said the UN and ASEAN would continue to press the GOB on access and emphasize to the government that long waits did not constitute the "free access" the GOB had committed to. He also announced the Planning Minister would meet with the UN and NGOs later that day to announce new procedures.

¶9. (SBU) Baker emphasized the enormous need for shelter. The UN had given out 200,000 tarps, but still required an

additional 500,000 tarps, which they were struggling to find.

Requirements for the survivors of the China earthquake had sucked up extra supplies and the UN was surveying donors and checking all sources to quickly find the additional shelter materials they needed. He praised U.S. responsiveness in finding additional supplies.

¶10. (SBU) WFP Director Chris Kaye said the UN had finally obtained approval to use its helicopters, with the last four of the ten helicopters arriving in Rangoon June 10. Six were operational and flying supplies to the Delta, and the final four would begin operating soon. Kaye continued that the WFP needed USD 31 million to continue logistics operations, including helicopters, and an additional USD 41 million to purchase food. The Minister of Commerce had notified WFP on June 8 that it would not allow them to purchase additional rice supplies from Burma (20,000 tons had been agreed to by the GOB, of which WFP had only procured 10,000 tons), because they were concerned with maintaining stability in their domestic rice market. The WFP now sought to purchase rice in Thailand, which would be considerably more expensive (\$550/MT as opposed to \$400/MT procured locally). Without additional funding, the WFP's food pipeline would break by the end of June, Kaye reported.

¶11. (SBU) MSF Holland (AZG) Director Frank Smithius spoke on behalf of the INGO community to appeal for additional donor funding of INGOs. He asserted that several villages in the Delta had yet to receive any aid or relief supplies, and asked why there were significant areas where no assistance had been provided. He noted that travel authorizations were still a problem and said the INGOs could still procure rice locally. AZG purchased rice without asking for official permission, and had encountered no problems. He informed that AZG distributed relief supplies through their own staff to ensure accountability. Out of 40,000 bags of rice and beans AZG had delivered, only 70 could not be accounted for after being taken by GOB officials. Although the GOB

RANGOON 00000468 003.2 OF 003

provided them with a list of where and to whom it had delivered the rice, AZG had not had time yet to verify this information.

¶12. (C) Comment: Again we see some progress mixed with continuing challenges. The TCG will continue to push the government for blanket access, but it is clear from the experience of the advance teams that the GOB remains nervous about letting foreigners loose in their territory. The General's paranoia will continue to be a significant obstacle to the relief effort. However, a united front maintained by the international community and strong pressure from the UN and ASEAN should produce the most credible and comprehensive assessment of the scale of the disaster caused by Cyclone Nargis and the needs of the people. As long as this continues, we should be able to get assistance to the millions of victims eventually. It should not be taking this long, but the steady pressure has worked so far. End comment.

VILLAROSA